

[J. R. Meers]

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Folkstuff - Pioneer Lore

FOLKWAYS

Wm. V. Ervin, P. W.

McLennan County, Texas.

District No. 8.

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Interview with J. R. [Moors?], Chief, Waco Fire Department, Waco, Texas.

"The first volunteer fire department in Waco was organized April 2, 1873; and was known as the Rescue Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 Colonel Wiley Jones was the chief.

"I first joined us a volunteer in 1892, and after serving several months, I went on the night shift for three years and eight months. The night shift were two men who were paid to be on hand for night alarms. I went on as extra man August 7, 1896, at \$30.00 a month. The only paid men were the engineer, who received \$75 a month; the driver of the engine, \$65; and the drivers of the hose cart and the hook and ladder, each \$60. The extra men took the places of these men when necessary and if they acted in the place of any of

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the drivers they received double pay, or \$60. for the month in which they did the work. I went on regular in 1898. I became chief of the department April 21, 1917, succeeding Ed. Baurle.

"One night in the spring of 1892, after I had joined as volunteer, I was visiting with the night men, and decided to stay all night. I had to sleep on a pool table. It was the hardest bed I ever had. But while I was there I turned in my first alarm. A fire broke out in the J. W. Winfred livery stable, and spread to the J. W. Blackwell toy store, which was a large concern; and also destroyed the Ed Straus wholesale hardware store. These buildings were across the alley from the old postoffice, and faced on Fourth and Mary streets, where the White Line Taxi and Baggage Co. are now. We got a number of the horses out of the livery stable, but some ran back in, and a lot of them were burned to death C - 12 Tex.

"In those days out where there was no pavement, the apparatus was likely to get stuck in the mud if it was rainy weather. One time we got stuck for an hour or more, or until mules were brought and pulled us out. 2 The place where the fire was, burned down.

"We had an aerial tiller truck in 1893, but no tillerman, and the tiller had to be locked if there was no one on hand to operate it and the driver would have to make wide turns like he would if he had a trailer. The Cotton Palace burned in 1893.

"In those days when I first joined the department there were mostly pretty tough men in it. We were right down by the redlight district, at the foot of Washington street, and no respectable people ever came down that far. There was no bridge, and the street went to a dead-end at the river. Many a time I've seen the hook and ladder truck come into the station with the redlight girls hung all over it.

"The men all drank. The old chief drank, and of course we younger men thought it was all right for us to drink, too. I did, but one day I thought to myself that I wasn't getting

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anywhere that way, so I quit drinking, and haven't drank since. I was about twenty-five then.

“When I became chief, I decided to give a chance to the men who drank and had never got anywhere, and maby make good men out of them, but there was such a small percentage of them who did any good that it was not worthwhile. There were only two out of about thirty-five or forty that I tried, and it took some hard work to get those two to do right.

“A good many of my boys went into the army during the World War. Most of them wrote me regularly. Two of them were on the American troopship that was torpedoed off the Irish coast, the Tuscanis I think it was, but they were rescued.

“Here is a letter from one named Robert McWilliams, who lived at South Sixteenth and [?lay]. He says, “I have just heard the sad news of the death of your little daughter.” The chief's glistened with tears. “He was a peculiar man. He was quiet and didn't have much to say. When he got the call to go into the war, he said to me. “I'm going over, but I'll never come back.” He didn't; he died in France of the flu”.